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ABSTRACT

To reduce Rhode Island's high percentage of students being classified as learning disabled, an advisory committee recommended development of a statewide Learning Disabilities Identification Process (L.D.I.D.), to prepare evaluation teams to consistently consider regulatory criteria and to justify their decisions when making learning disability determinations. L.D.I.D. helps teams share and analyze information, focus on the severe discrepancy criterion, keep distractors out of the way, and maintain team professional decision-making responsibility. The approach features analysis and recording of information to concentrate on ability and achievement, and appropriate use of a statistical comparison of scores. Evaluation team members are informed of appropriate evaluation practices through district workshops, a network of contact persons, and a newsletter. The process is being implemented in over 90% of Rhode Island's school districts. A Guideline Chart, which indicates how the student's performance compares to a benchmark level of 1.5 standard deviations of difference on ability and achievement test scores, is used as a legitimate tool by teams but does not dominate decision making. Rhode Island's learning disability incidence figures are declining. Seven references and three related documents are listed. (JDD)

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OPERATIONALIZING A DEFINITION: RHODE ISLAND'S LEARNING DISABILITIES IDENTIFICATION PROCESS

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Why did Rhode Island Evaluation Teams Need a Statewide Learning Disabilities Identification Process (L.D.I.D.)?

In 1983, the nationwide trend of ever-increasing numbers of students being identified as learning disabled led to the formation of the National Task Force on Learning Disabilities. The Task Force explored reasons for the rapid growth of this category and made recommendations for change (Chalfant, 1984). The following year, the Commissioner's Ad Hoc Committee on Learning Disabilities was formed in Rhode Island to extend the Task Force's work at the state level.

At that time, Rhode Island's learning disabilities percentages were the highest in the country. Having entered the post-P.L. 94-142 era with an already sizable identified population of students with learning disabilities, our growth curve matched that of the United States as a whole. By 1984, almost 65% of our students with disabilities were labeled learning disabled, versus about 42% nationally.

The state Committee investigated ways to reduce Rhode Island's high learning disabilities percentages. Committee research found Rhode Island evaluation teams making learning disability decisions based on a wide variety of "criteria." Frequently, these criteria had little to do with those specified in state or federal regulations.

After considerable study, the committee made two main recommendations (Ryan, 1985). The first centered on increasing instructional alternatives used in general education classrooms to meet a wider variety of student needs. Called the Classroom Alternatives Process, it is basically a support system enabling classroom teachers to help each other develop, implement and evaluate alternative interventions for students having difficulties learning in school (DeFanti and DiMeo, Revised 1990). The impact was intended to be a reduction of referrals to special education for the kinds of help that could more appropriately be delivered within general education.

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The other main recommendation of the Committee was for a statewide Learning Disabilities Identification Process, or L.D.I.D. A systematic approach, it was meant to help evaluation teams consistently consider regulatory criteria and justify their decisions when making learning disability determinations (Woolman and McDonald, Revised 1989).

This second recommendation and its implementation are the subjects of this paper. As a basis for understanding, the reader should be aware that the central learning disabilities identification criterion of Rhode Island regulations is a severe discrepancy between ability and achievement.

The Learning Disabilities Identification Process was developed as part of the four-year Learning Disabilities Project of the Rhode Island Department of Education. During the years 1986-1989, this initiative was partially supported by a competitive personnel preparation grant from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education.

WHAT IS L.D.I.D., AND WHAT'S DIFFERENT ABOUT IT?

Teams using the Learning Disabilities Identification Process (L.D.I.D.) do the things most typical teams do in gathering information and preparing for team meetings. However, in those meetings, L.D.I.D. helps teams structure their discussions of the varied information they have gathered. L.D.I.D. also avoids the distraction to team decision-making of pressures to provide help, and other non-regulatory "criteria." The team decision is based on a variety of information, not on a mathematical comparison.

L.D.I.D. prepares teams to make informed decisions using regulatory criteria. It is a systematic approach to help teams:

1) share and analyze information
2) focus on the severe discrepancy criterion
3) keep distractors out of the way
4) maintain team professional decision-making responsibility.

Two techniques of the L.D.I.D. were different for most teams we trained: analysis and recording of information to concentrate on ability and achievement; and appropriate use of a statistical comparison of scores. This brief description can only serve as an introduction. More detailed information and examples may be found in the Guide to the Learning Disabilities Identification Process (Woolman and McDonald, Revised 1989).

When using the analysis technique, a team sorts all the information they have gathered for elements relating to ability and achievement in the student's area(s) of difficulty. Using an Elements Sheet, the team records appropriate information in the following categories:

1) Essential - information on ability or achievement in the area of difficulty. This information is "essential" to the severe discrepancy decision. Essential elements are drawn from classroom information as well as from individual assessments, both formal and informal.

2) Supportive - information on school history, or areas of strength, that provides context for essential information.

3) Incidental - (usually not recorded on the elements sheet) all other information on the student. Although perhaps important for instructional planning, incidental information is not about ability or achievement and therefore not part of the severe discrepancy decision.

The elements technique focuses discussion on ability and achievement, and provides a list of essential elements on which to base the severe discrepancy decision. Teams then use the elements list to write a description of the student's severe discrepancy, or lack thereof, that justifies the team's decision.

Coming to a decision and writing the description based on ability and achievement elements serves to operationalize the criteria. Teams are less likely to identify as learning disabled a student with less than severe difficulties, or a student who is working at an appropriate pace for his/her ability.

Appropriate use of a statistical comparison of ability and achievement scores is the second technique teams have been taught. When certain scores are available, teams use this comparison as a guideline. They do so by using what we call the Guideline Chart.

In contrast to a number of states, in Rhode Island the statistical technique is not the basis for the learning disability determination. In fact, teams are urged to avoid letting the Guideline Chart, on the basis of two test scores, make their decision for them. The Guideline Chart results provide just one piece of information the team uses to make its decision.

The Guideline Chart is adapted from a standard score regression formula approach developed in the state of Maryland. Extensive conditions, precautions, limitations, instructions and references for its use are provided in the Guide.

If a team has valid ability and achievement test scores that meet certain standards, it may refer to the Guideline Chart. The Guideline Chart indicates how the student's performance compares to a benchmark level of 1-1/2 standard deviations of difference. The team may use the Guideline Chart for only one area of achievement, although it may document more than one area of discrepancy in its description. Recording Guideline Chart results on a Difference Scale provides a visual profile to aid team interpretation of the student's performance.

One reason the Guideline Chart approach was chosen was its simplicity, which helps keep it in perspective and avoid team reliance on the statistical comparison. It has been suggested that statistical techniques which involve the use of tables or computers may tend to play a larger role in team decision-making because of their complex and technical nature (Mainzer, et al, 1983).

Because of limitations of validity and reliability, the Guideline Chart may only be used with students eight years of age or older. Because of the lack of needed statistical data, the Chart may only be used with a few tests, and only for students whose difficulties are in the basic academic areas.

In addition to these two techniques, the L.D.I.D. includes procedures and documentation to support teams as they gather and analyze information and come to their conclusions. Because the process has evolved over the past few years through continuous interaction with evaluation teams throughout the state, it represents a statewide procedural consensus.

HOW DID OVER 700 EVALUATION TEAM MEMBERS LEARN TO USE THE PROCESS IN FOUR YEARS' TIME?

Each district workshop series has had as its goal the development of a systematic team approach to decision-making. In order to build a foundation for lasting change in each team's approach, orientation to the process has been in-depth.

Two State Department of Education consultants provided training throughout the state. In a typical series, twelve hours of workshop sessions were spread over three days. Content of the workshops included background and philosophy, procedures and techniques, and practice.

Approximately one month after each initial workshop series, a follow-up session was held. In addition to insuring that the new process would be implemented promptly, the return visit allowed for refinement and reinforcement of procedures.

Throughout the state, most team members received orientation directly through participation in the state-led workshops. Newer team members have learned the process through the Guide to the Learning Disabilities Identification Process and through interaction with their district colleagues.

HOW DO WE KEEP IN TOUCH WITH ALL THESE PEOPLE?

After the first year, the numbers of team members involved in the process made it difficult to keep in touch with all of them. In order to keep communication flowing, we developed our contact person network, with one or more volunteer liaisons in each district.

Information has passed from the state office to teams, and vice versa, through the contact persons, providing important awareness of the need for intervention in specific districts.

Throughout the project, meetings were held as needed in individual districts and/or with individual teams. Occasionally, all contacts were gathered together for group meetings.

Recently, a newsletter has been going to all team members via the contact persons. Through it clarification and reinforcement of appropriate practices can be provided. The newsletter has encouraged communication, as evidenced by increased interaction initiated by contacts and also by individual team members.

IS ALL THIS MAKING ANY DIFFERENCE?

Extensive evaluation efforts were carried out throughout the years of the project. Formative evaluation activities provided ongoing information for modification of procedures and training.

Summative evaluation activities at the end of the training cycle produced the following findings (DiSanto, 1989; Rallis, 1989):

1) The process is being implemented in over 90% of districts.

2) Special education personnel accept severe discrepancy as the focus of learning disability determination.

3) Teams view the Guideline Chart as a legitimate tool; there is a high level of agreement between team decisions and Chart results.

4) However, the Guideline Chart does not dominate decision-making.

5) If there is 'disagreement' with Chart results, it is usually in the direction of determining a severe discrepancy.

6) There are external forces on evaluation teams, especially pressure to provide service to students who need 'help.'

7) In some districts, there is a high percentage of students determined not to be learning disabled after evaluation. This demonstrates the need for classroom interventions.

8) Rhode Island learning disability incidence figures are declining. A number of educational trends and initiatives in the state may be influencing this decrease.

Future evaluation activities center around the need for review and analysis of team decision-making. Local districts need systems for analyzing results of team evaluations and decision-making over time, and for re-directing teams as needed toward appropriate criteria and procedures. Districts are being encouraged to develop these systems locally, in an effort to reinforce their responsibility.

The state office needs to oversee statewide and local trends in learning disability identification and revisit districts as needed. A consultant will continue to review statistical incidence data and to maintain communication through the newsletter and direct interaction.

Project information and documents are available from the Rhode Island Department of Education. A listing of documents and an address follow.

[Paper prepared for presentation at the Council for Exceptional Children Convention, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, on April 25, 1990, by Ina S. Woolman and Dr. Diane DiSanto. Elizabeth McDonald, of the Rhode Island Department of Education, and Dr. Sharon Rallis, of the Center for Evaluation and Research at Rhode Island College, provided important support in its development.]

Documents Available

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